

# *TALES OF* *Liverpool*

*Essay no 2*



*Some People Think Football Is a Matter of Life or  
Death – I Can Assure You It Is Much More Than  
Important Than That .*

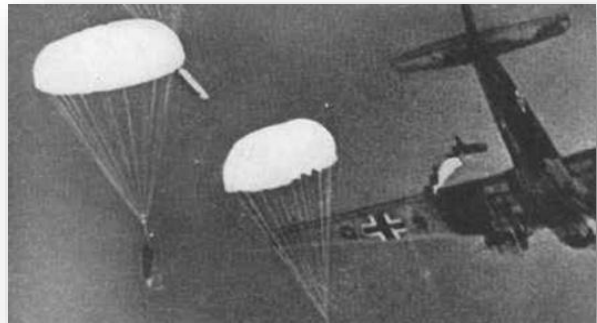
*Bill Shankly*

## **War Baby**

Off Picton road, just beyond the bridge, there is a road called Ashfield; built circa 1900, the houses were sturdy, with a railing in front, and the Church of St. Thomas lending the area a sense of propriety - all in all, Ashfield was, and still is, a respectable place to live. In the year 2025, Ashfield is looking somewhat careworn, while the demolition of the church does the area no favours, with the 2 or 3 new-build houses near to Picton road, looking incongruous against the background of the original buildings. The history of Ashfield is normally one of suburban tranquillity, but the singular event when disaster came in an instant, is either spoken of as jumbled hearsay or lost to a new generation, in which one family were wiped out while others had fortuitous escapes. During the Second World War, while the docks were the main target for the German bombers, as early as 1939 onwards, the Luftwaffe also made sustained attacks on chosen areas throughout Liverpool, with the Gas Works and the Railway along Wavertree road coming in for special attention. The bombers were not too particular where their bombs landed, and the surrounding houses, densely packed with street after street of two-up and two-down terraces, paid a heavy price, with many a street having a gaping cavity where a house had once stood; Clint road school and Botanic park conservatory were both destroyed by inaccurate bomb aimers, usually from Heinkel He 111's, and when each bombing raid was over, the people breathed a sigh of relief and got on with their lives.

As far as Ashfield was concerned, the railway across Picton road was always a cause for concern, but so far, the road had escaped damage – until the night of the 29<sup>th</sup> November, 1940, when a parachute floated slowly down, looking quite innocuous as it swirled from side to side. After an interminable time, when a gust of wind sent it this way and that, it finally settled at no 23 Ashfield; the deadly mine it carried, wiped out the house, and in a catastrophe beyond words, every member comprising six of the Knowles family were killed - from a 61 year old Grandmother to a 3 year old toddler. It is largely forgotten today that such was the extent of the explosion the adjacent houses were also destroyed – one of those houses contained a 19 year old girl and her parents, all fast

asleep when the house fell in around them. By some miracle nobody was hurt but the family went to live in nearby Pilot Grove, and my future Grandfather and Grandmother and Mother picked themselves up and did what everybody in those days, and carried on. When my mother married some time afterwards, my father returned to fighting Nazism in the Royal Navy, and my mother found a rented house in Casterton street, where on the very first day of 1943, for better or for worse, I made my appearance into the world. Like most toddlers, I have only fleeting memories of my childhood, but I recall distinctly my playground, and



playing with the bricks and ephemera from the remains of the house at the end of the street, where another errant bomb had landed with its devastating effects. With my father at sea and my grandfather in Scotland looking after regimental horses, I suppose I lived in a maternal heaven where I did nothing but play and eat – but this was soon to change when I first encountered what then passed for “the real world” and in between lessons, was soon to start kicking a ball around in the playground Webster road infants school.

## **The Blackboard Jungle**

My introduction to school life at had begun with a shock which is as vivid today as it was then in 1948; entering a classroom full of wooden desks is a strange experience for any child, but things became even stranger when a lady teacher entered the room, and a host of 5 year-old's soon realised that she may have been a teacher, but she was no lady. The first words that she uttered were to bark out the order to Look Up !! which, in my childish innocence, I took literally, and wondered why I had been instructed to stare at the ceiling. I was rewarded for my diligence with a rap across the knuckles with a ruler, the shock and pain of which still rankles to this day; nevertheless, I had learned two valuable lessons, which were that there was such a thing as injustice in this world, and never to sit at the front of the class.

All of the teachers were middle-aged women, and none of them were the cuddly creatures, I had been used to - they were, in fact, quite the opposite, and ruled their classes with a rod of iron, or willow in this case. Most of the

lessons were learnt by rote, with the teacher pointing a vicious-looking stick at the blackboard, and the class chanting in unison, "1 and 1 is 2", "2 and 2 is 4," moving on to "12 twelve is twelve," "2 twelves are 24," and then on to the heady heights of "12 twelves are 144." The only respite from these monotonous incantations, was when the milk monitor came round, and kid-size bottles of milk were handed out. Thankfully, English lessons were less intense than the arithmetic classes, and *Janet and John* was quite a relief from the Gregorian chanting and veiled threats from the arithmetic teacher, which is probably the reason why I remain far better at English than maths. Alongside the English classes, we were taught to write in block letters, using a wooden pen with a nib which we dipped in the China inkwell at the top of the desk - the resulting mess was quite predictable, and I don't know about anyone else's mother, but mine spent every evening scrubbing Quink off my fingers before tea. Eventually, one by one we moved onto "cursive" writing which was quite a red-letter day in any pupil's life. We kids did not realize it at the time, and would not have cared less anyway, but the fabled three "R"s were being drummed into us - Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. Enthralling as *Korky the Kat* and *Biffo the Bear* were then, *Janet and John's* middle-class adventures were unfamiliar enough to keep us interested; there was also the added incentive of moving onto the next book in the sequence, never realizing in our innocence, that some underhanded educationalist had made each one more difficult than the last.



Strangely, the only male teacher in the school was the Headmaster, and as far as I was concerned, he was the only person there with a scrap of humanity. Every so often, Mr Williams, would have us sit round in a circle, and in a soothing voice would tell us all a story, stimulating impressionable imaginations into worlds of wonder. At this distance in time, I wonder if his sonorous tones had more of a calming effect on himself, surrounded as he was by his flock of harpies who stalked the corridors of Webster road infants school.

At other times in the loosely titled curriculum, we were treated to what were laughingly called music lessons. However, these "lessons," which took place in the tiny hall, never involved any such things as a piano or violin, but a teacher carrying a collection of recorders, ocarinas, harmonicas, castanets, and so on, all of which had seen better days. The music lessons, which by the way, were very popular among we students, took a very out of the ordinary structure, where a teacher, having drawn straws for the privilege, was met by a howling mob of excited children, and threw down the musical instruments and fled. For music lovers, the over-excited children were anything but placid, as they raced for their favourite instruments – mine was always the Triangle, because I could never find any other. Once everybody had sorted themselves, the discordant clamour that arose was enough to wake the dead – and when the teachers could stand it no longer that was when the music lesson ended.

Another relief from the incessant chanting was our weekly swimming lessons in Lodge Lane Baths, to which we were herded in a crocodile, which veered this way and that. Nobody ever questioned why we had to travel all the way to Lodge Lane when Webster road school had a swimming pool of its own which was never used, and in the gloom of the basement could be seen to be covered in planks. Many years later, I found out from a workmate in Newsham park, called Len, the reason why the planks covered the pool - they were used to lay out the bodies killed in the Blitz, and it was Len's job, as a member of the Home Guard, to carry out that sombre job; Len, who lived opposite the school, knew many of the neighbours who had been killed and when they had been identified he tied a label onto each big toe. Whenever the spine-chilling swimming pool became laden with bodies, then Len moved to a few hundred yards to the Earl Marshall pub, where the yard was stacked with more of the victims of the bombing – the pub was forever known as the Deadhouse.

Looking back, I can see now that those lady teachers accomplished a difficult task, at a time when parents worked long hours, and had no time for home schooling - and it is true that we were far from ideal pupils. The methods of teaching may have been Victorian in origin, but the fact is that they worked, and the class of '53 eventually emerged, for the most part, able to write a decent letter, read a book, and work out the price of their shopping. Parents today would be aghast at the use of the cane, even if it was mostly for show, and they would be up in arms at some of the manhandling of pupils, but that was then and this is now. It took a long time for me to realize why the teachers were all female, but there it was in plain sight - most of their menfolk were away at war.

### **With Great Powers .....**

The first time I ever played in a game of football I was still at probably aged about 8 or 9. Although it was such a long time ago, I remember everything about it, which tells me that it must have been quite an event in my young life. The whole thing began with the protracted process of being picked for the team, which was about to play some important game in the Mystery on the following Saturday. Although none of the team would have known what it meant, the process of picking the team was totally undemocratic, with a nucleus of boys recognised, by themselves mostly, as the best players, picking the lesser members of the team. Most of the boys on the fringes of the team were chosen, less for their ability, but because they were friends of the inner circle, and since small boys are always falling out with each other, the fringe members were always changing, with some thrown on the scrapheap, never to play again. Although I used to kick a ball in the school yard, I had never even been on the fringes of the fringes, and never expected to be, so it was quite a surprise when my name came up as a prospective player. There must have been a lot of fallings outs for them to consider me at all, but even so, the bickering and Chinese whispers took several days, before the footballing mafioso grudgingly decided to pick me for the game. Evidently, we were to play a game of some importance against another school, so, even though I was only chosen because the list of prospective candidates had dwindled to nil, the responsibility still lay heavily on my shoulders.

### **When Saturday Comes**



The day finally dawned when the game was to be played, and eleven drowsy players, hugging their arms against the cold of the morning, dawdled in one by one outside the school gates. In the absence of any form of transport, teachers or parents, eleven ragamuffins began to make their way to the Mystery, along Lawrence road. In those days, I always thought of anywhere beyond Webster road as posh, mostly because the houses had little brick walls outside, and the really posh houses had a privet hedge and bay windows. It must have been quite early in the morning as I remember that everywhere was quiet, so quiet, in fact, that the milk bottles were still on the steps - it goes without saying that eleven householders went without their milk that morning. There was something quite satisfying about drinking that cold milk, and in a way which is difficult to explain even now, we felt quite justified in taking from people we perceived to be better off than ourselves. By the way, if anyone from Grosvenor road remembers their milk going missing, circa 1949, let me know and I will reimburse you the threepence.

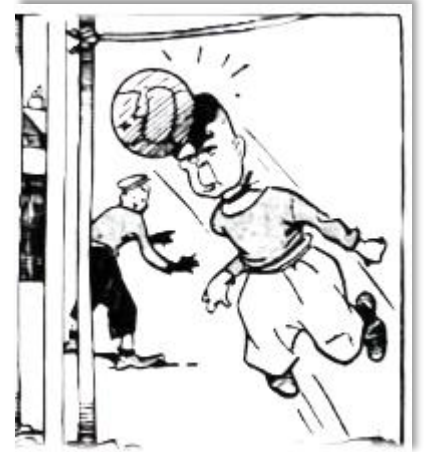
As we got nearer to the Mystery, the sense of anticipation heightened, manifesting itself in small boy pranks, and wrestling matches and kicking the ball along; the ball was quite different to the lightweight beach ball I was used to kicking in the playground, and the heavy, leather case-ball with the laces protruding looked a bit daunting - it seemed to move quite well along the pavement, unless it fell laces down and bounced off at all angles, but I was soon to find it would be a different matter altogether on a pitch with the consistency of glue.



### **The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Full Back**

So, in this lackadaisical way, we finally reached the arena where the great game was to be played. When I think about it, I had never really seen a proper football pitch close up before, much less play on one, and, standing in my position of right back - chosen for me by the cabal of "good" players - it appeared to me to be unbelievably large. There were no football shirts to identify us - we all wore our everyday clothes and we all wore short pants anyway - so there was no problem there. Some of the more experienced players had football boots with tops which extended over their ankles, and laces which took a few days to thread through the eyelets, but I wore my white pumps, which nobody thought unusual. I remember to this day, standing a solitary figure at the back, and looking up the length of the full-size pitch which tilted alarmingly in my direction - my team mates looked like ants at that distance, and every time I ventured forward, somebody screamed at me to get back - Trent Alexander-Arnold was a long way into the future. However, I was marginally better off than the goalkeeper who patrolled a goalmouth which was about two feet lower than the rest of the field, and would have done service as a trench in the first World War.

We must have had a good team though because most of the action took place in the distant goalmouth, where I had no clue as to what was happening. After what seemed like hours, standing in a muddy field, suddenly a player I didn't recognize came flying towards our goal, and even though I was a bit vague about my role I knew it was my responsibility to stop him. To the surprise of everybody, including myself, I did just that, and for the first time in the game I found myself with the ball at my feet, knowing that I had to pass it to the forwards who looked quite a long way in the distance. Manfully, I struck the ball as hard as I could with my pumps, which were now more black than white, and to my eternal shame, the ball trundled about three yards before coming to a stop in the mud - and worse still my toes hurt with the impact. I had stopped the other player from scoring which was a good thing, but it still came as a shock to realise that I could only move the football a few yards, when I fully expected to see it soar into the opposition goalmouth. But there were more shocks to come when the only other time I touched the ball it was to head it. As the game gradually deteriorated into a melée, for some reason, I found myself in the opposition goalmouth, and one of my team, with no thought whatsoever for my lack of skill, lobbed the ball into the area, where somebody shouted for me to head it. Like a simpleton, I did exactly as I was ordered, and was immediately flattened by what seemed like a cannonball. There were lots of "firsts" in this auspicious day and the next "first" was realising that when *Billy Bunter*, or *Korky the Cat*, or *Biffo the Bear* was hit on the head and saw stars circling around their heads, it was not just a cartoonist's invention but it really happened. Judging by the triumphal leaps at the end of the game, our team won the game, but I never saw any of the goals as most of the game more than passed me by. Despite saving a certain goal, I was never picked again, and truth to tell, I was quite relieved, as the thought of heading that ball again filled me with dread.



### **Injuries May Be Forgiven, But Not Forgotten**

*Aesop*

However, as time went by, and I entered a new school at the age of 11, I slowly discovered that I would never play at Anfield, but I did enjoy the exhilarating thrill of the game - apart from playing with a case ball, once again I resisted any temptation of heading the ball. As my unfamiliar studs clattered down from the dressing-rooms of Eaton road playing fields, in my newly purchased boots there was little chance of any bones broken as the leather reached up to the ankles - and on a muddy field with markings all over place, I renewed my footballing skills. And time went by, my childish dreams of playing alongside the football stars of yesterday began to fade, and my footballing skills, no more than adequate, became reality, I was pragmatic enough to settle for the skills I had.



When the time arrived to leave school and begin work as an apprentice gardener, I was delighted to discover that nearly every park that I worked at, there were boys, men, and even those approaching retirement, all eager to play football for an hour or so during lunch time, and what's more there were football pitches marked out.

The games played out in Calderstones were serious affairs, with several semi-pro's playing; they took no prisoners and I was at that time skilful enough to avoid serious injury. However, one of the players, who had started work that same day, was naïve enough to think that the game was some light-hearted fun, and broke his leg during the first tackle. The game went on while the lad was writhing in pain, and taken by ambulance to hospital, he was never seen again.







The game at Harthill, was just as serious, and everyone joined in the fun, and while some of the players had been good in their day, the fact that they were a lot older made no difference at all, as they played with an intensity all of their own. The mechanics at the workshops always brought out a metal, replica F.A. Cup, complete with ribbons they had fashioned; gleaming in the sunshine looking for all the world like the real F.A. Cup, no matter how many goals we scored or how hard we defended, the Cup always ended back with the mechanics, to be brought out again next year.

I began to enjoy the game more and more, as we played in lunch time games at Clarke Gardens. These also became quite serious affairs with players from Garston and other workplaces challenging us to games - there were broken legs, torn muscles and torn ankle ligaments (that was me) but it was great and went on for several years. On one occasion, the whole game stopped with everyone doubled up with laughter when the opposing centre- forward who was too obese to run, so he hung around like a spare part; but we soon found out why he was in the team - he had a shot like a cannonball, and when he finally got the ball, struck a tremendous shot which rattled the bar; the quivered like a wobbleboard for a short time until it crashed down, leaving the goalkeeper shrouded in netting, like a fish in a net.

The significance of these games was brought home to me when I was in Belle vale shopping centre, and someone shouted me. I didn't recognize Sid at first as it was all of 60 years since I had seen him, but the first words he said were "*Were'nt those football games brilliant!*" And they were!

### **Pigs Might Fly**

When bygone days of football were played, the ball consisted of loosely bound pieces of leather with a pig's bladder inside; It did not take much for the whole thing to become unbalanced and the ball flying off in all directions. When an American chemist named Charles Goodyear in 1839, invented, a way of hardening rubber, making it smooth and dry, it was the embryonic research which is still carried on today in the search for the perfect football. Most football fans today would be hard put a name to Charles Goodyear, but without him and his invention of vulcanization, we would still be blowing up pig's bladders and lumping round old pieces of leather. So, Goodyear's research was also good news for pigs – but it took all of 35 years, in 1877, for the vulcanized rubber to be incorporated within an improved brown leather stitching.

Although it takes some believing, the football used in the 1966 World, which the whole world knows was won by England, was not much different than the football embodied in 1877. It was the 1970's when the case-ball became obsolete – footballs became more attractive for young players, and a generation knowing nothing of way that football used to be played.



*Charles Goodyear*

## Seeing Stars

It has been said that British footballers have never had the same skill as "them continentals" and Brazilians, but while footballers from warmer climes were practicing Cruyff turns, Rabonas, Pullbacks, Elasticos, and so on, it took British players all their time to get the ball to move where they wanted it, on pitches which were often just a glutinous mess. How players of yesteryear struck the ball so hard, and Billy Liddell, Dixie Dean, and Stanley Matthews et al played so skilfully, using a case ball on a viscous surface, designed to stop them, is an enigma never solved.

The prowess in heading a ball took a special kind of finesse, employing remarkable neck muscles, a whip like motion of the head and a temple hard enough to hammer the ball at astonishing distances. When the ball was wet, which was more often than not, or worse still, someone had been careless in tying the laces, it took a great deal of determination to head a ball in those circumstances. According to present day research, if any player knew what a heavy price could be paid in heading a ball, perhaps they would have chosen to use their heads in a very different way – or perhaps not.

Professional footballers knew the power of a case ball - Stan Cullis was knocked unconscious in a game against Everton during the 1938-39 season. He suffered a severe concussion and required intensive medical treatment. He was told that another concussion of that severity would kill him. It didn't stop him from playing and, a couple of years later, he was hit in the face with a football. He suffered another severe concussion and was in a critical condition for 5 days. He was told that even heading a heavy leather football could prove fatal, so Cullis, who at that point was England Captain, decided to retire – but not one of those players could imagine the effect in later life.

It was no coincidence that turf technology ran apace research with football research, and the days when professional players played on pitches where the only treatment was to fork over mud and then run a mower up and down, was long gone. Winter or summer, the pitches in the Premier League are pristine, and when turf can be imported at any size or depth, the saturated crater in the goalmouth can be renewed at any time. Any visitors to Liverpool Football Club are forbidden to go near the pitch, which is an undisclosed mix of hybrid grasses interwoven with a latticework of another clandestine material.

Boys' football today is a far cry from games in the Mystery mud - they are transported in a team coach, have colourful playing kits, play with a lightweight football, and play on a well- marked, nicely mown, half-size pitch, which is more suited to their size and strength; finally, they have real encouragement from teachers, parents and coaches.

In 1970, Adidas researched the problem of leather balls still absorbing water, and in 2020, came up with the Uniforia which solved the problem – but research still goes on today.





**JOHN HUSSEY**  
**2025**